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“Barbaric Yawp” in Turkish

The first selection of Whitman’s poetry ever to be translated into Turkish comprised the first four stanzas of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” This translation came out in 1937 and was published in one of the most prominent monthly literary magazines of the time, *Yücel Aylık Sanat ve Fikir Mecmuası*. It is perhaps not surprising that the Turkish Walt Whitman would make his first appearance in a republican and pro-Atatürk literary magazine, given Atatürk’s efforts on behalf of cultural Westernization. The translator was an eminent scholar-critic named Orhan Burian, then a young man of twenty-three, who had just returned to Istanbul with a degree in English literature from the University of Cambridge.

Later, in 1951, a partial nineteen-page translation of *Leaves of Grass* was published in Turkey. The translator was Suat Taşer, a socialist poet. Through the translator’s introductory essay, the poems chosen for translation and even the inscriptions in this slim volume, Whitman is presented as a non-dogmatic proponent of democracy, whose distinguishing characteristic is his ability to establish intimacy with crowds. The second book-length translation of Whitman, undertaken by Memet Fuat, appeared just three years later and featured six more poets, who had undertaken translations of Whitman poems. Later on, three more editions of Whitman translations, all undertaken by Memet Fuat, were published in Turkey, in 1985, 1992, and 2003 respectively. None of these versions, however, includes the famous “barbaric yawp.” In fact, a complete translation of *Leaves of Grass* has yet to be done in Turkish. It seems as if

Turkish translators took Whitman at his word, treating his barbaric yawp as untranslatable.

The only instance in which we actually encounter the “barbaric yawp” in Turkish is in the subtitles for Peter Weir’s *Dead Poets Society*. In a famous scene, John Keating (Robin Williams) writes “I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world” in an effort to get one of his students to open up to poetry. The subtitlers translated this line as *İçimdeki barbarca çığlığı dünyanın çatısından haykırıyorum!* (Literally: “I am shouting the barbaric cry, which is within me, from the world’s rooftop.”)

Interestingly, *barbarca*—the Turkish word for barbaric—is not Turkish at all, but a mid-nineteenth century loanword from the French *barbare*, used to refer to those speaking an incomprehensible language. This period in Ottoman history was marked by a decided Francophilia. It is ironic, perhaps, that the Ottomans, seeking desperately to emulate the French, would borrow that culture’s word for barbarian.

Perhaps the translators were also thinking onomatopoeically. A homonym of the word “barbar” (Turkish for barbarian) is the phrase *bar bar*, which was used in 17th-century Turkish to mean “howling like a bear,” according to the *Turkish Etymological Dictionary*. It is also used in contemporary Turkish in the idiomatic phrase: *bar bar bağırarak* to mean “to shout intensely.” “Bar” is repeated twice to emphasize the intensity of the shouting. This brings us closer to Whitman’s “yawp.” Variations of “barbaric” and “barbarian” were also used in translating Theodor W. Adorno’s famous dictum (*Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch; Auschwitz’den sonra şiir yazmak da barbarlıktır*), and C. P. Cavafy’s poem “Waiting for the Barbarians” (“Barbarları Beklerken”; *Çapan, Kavafis’ten Kırk Şiir*).

The Turkish word the translators chose for “yawp,” on the other hand, is *çığlık* (scream, cry, shriek). It is the noun form of *çığırarak*, which is an early (pre-1400) variant of *çağırarak* (to call someone or make a sound). *Çığlık* is a very onomatopoeic word and captures the aura of Whitman’s poetry. Until the Turkish language reforms of the 1930s, Arabic and Farsi loanwords tended to dominate the elevated diction of Turkish poetry. Here, however,

we have an ordinary Turkish word, but one with strong phonic value. This choice is in keeping with Whitman's plain-spoken diction and democratic sensibilities.

The verb the translators chose for "I sound" (*haykirmek*) is also an appropriate accompaniment to "yawp." *Haykirmek* is an example of onomatopoeia. It is composed of the sound of shouting and comes from Old English. It is a word with deep roots in the Turkish language.

One wonders why a complete Turkish translation of *Leaves of Grass* has not yet been undertaken. All five of the Turkish translations of Whitman, including the most recent 2003 edition, are currently out of print. Only one thousand copies of the first 1951 translation were printed. This situation did not change with the 1954 edition; the publisher again printed one thousand copies. Compared to the circulation of Whitman in translation in other European countries, these are very minimal numbers. Along with the absence of any scholarly articles on Whitman, it suggests that *Leaves of Grass* has had a small influence in Turkey. Whitman's influence could have reached an apex in the 1970s, when modernism and translation from other languages became prevalent in modern Turkish literature. However, increasing anti-American sentiment might have prevented such an influence.

It was a group of young socialist and realist poets who introduced Whitman to a Muslim, Turkish audience. Unlike his influence on French symbolists, Whitman's reception did not generate innovations in Turkish literature. Moreover, by the time Whitman was translated into Turkish, there was already poetry in free verse by authors such as Nazım Hikmet. We can conclude that *Leaves of Grass* primarily had a sociopolitical influence in Turkey, not a linguistic one.

Though we have yet to know what future translators will make of Whitman's famous "barbaric yawp," it does seem probable that this line has reached some Turkish audiences indirectly through the popularity of *Dead Poets Society*. Subtitles, both formal and informal, have been a major medium of cultural communication since the rise of the internet. Though perhaps not being heard from the "roofs of the world," Whitman's howl continues to be heard.

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Summary

The article provides an analysis of Turkish translations of Walt Whitman, in particular of the famous line “I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.” The article further examines how Whitman was re-appropriated and refashioned in a novel cultural context and speculates why a complete translation of *Leaves of Grass* was never made.

Key words: comparative literature, translation studies, Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” Turkish literature

„Barbarzyńskie yawp” po turecku

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia analizę tureckich tłumaczeń poezji Włta Whitmana, w szczególności wersu „I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world”. Następnie autorka bada, w jaki sposób poezja Whitmana została przyswojona i przekształcona w nowym kontekście kulturowym, a także rozważa możliwe przyczyny braku pełnej wersji *Żdźbeł trawy* w języku tureckim.

Słowa kluczowe: komparatystyka literacka, studia przekładoznawcze, Walt Whitman, „Pieśń o mnie”, literatura turecka